DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 264 766 HE 018 939

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TITLE Igniting the Vital Spark: A Process of Peer Review and Consultation in Postsecondary Instruction.
PUB DATE 1 Apr 85
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 31-April 4, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; *College Instruction; *Consultation Programs; *Faculty Evaluation; Higher Education; *Instructional Improvement; *Peer Evaluation; Program Evaluation; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

A consultation method for analyzing and improving college instruction is described, along with views about the program by 10 faculty participants. The method employs two consultants and is based solely on individual consultation, teaching observations, and detailed critique. An initial meeting with the instructor addresses the individual's teaching responsibilities, strengths, weaknesses, and concerns. In addition to classroom observation, course materials may be reviewed, along with results of previous course evaluations by students. During the consultation process, articles, books, or videotapes may be recommended to the teacher. The participating faculty who evaluated the program represented a range of backgrounds, disciplines, and levels of teaching skills. They consistently rated the program highly and recommended that it be made available more widely and more often. The cost of the consultations was relatively low, and participants gained important insights and teaching skills. It is suggested that the consultation model has great potential as a cost-effective technique for instructional improvement at the college and departmental level. It appeals to a wide range of faculty and engages them in an active, collegial process of professional renewal. Guidelines for providing a teaching critique are included. (Author/SW)

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IGNITING THE VITAL SPARK: A PROCESS OF PEER REVIEW AND CONSULTATION IN POSTSECONDARY INSTRUCTION

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association; Chicago, Illinois; April 1, 1985.

ABSTRACT

The authors describe a consultation method for analyzing and improving instruction in higher education. The method employs two consultants to focus on observed teaching skills in an iterative process. An evaluation of the program is reported based upon responses from ten faculty participants. The respondents represented a range of backgrounds, disciplines, and initial levels of teaching skills. They consistently rated the program highly and recommended that it be made available more widely and more often. The cost of the consultations was relatively low, and the experience thus far indicates that the participants have gained important insights and teaching skills.

IGNITING THE VITAL SPARK: A PROCESS OF PEER REVIEW AND CONSULTATION IN POSTSECONDARY INSTRUCTION

For many faculty members in postsecondary education, their efforts, accomplishments, and concerns with regard to teaching skills go largely unnoticed in terms of tangible rewards or professional recognition. Particularly in large research universities, individual promotion and recognition tend to accrue primarily on the basis of publications, grants, scholarly activity, and, in some cases, on the basis of clinical practice or public service. Although teaching expertise is one criterion for appointments and promotions, it is usually not the primary concern for promotion and tenure decisions in major universities. Furthermore, the quality of an individual's teaching is difficult to assess in terms of valid quantitative measures.

Most academic departments and colleges have relatively few resources to offer to faculty members for systematically evaluating and improving their instruction. Peer evaluation of instruction is usually non-existent or haphazard. Evaluations from students can be obtained in a reliable and valid manner, but the validity of actual instruments and procedures for collection of course evaluation data is often questionnable. All too often evaluation forms are developed by the consensus of a faculty committee without regard to the instrument's reliability and validity. Often the response rate from students is too low for the instructor to have confidence in the results, and generally the results are gathered only at the end of the semester when it is too late to make any changes or improvements in that particular course offering.

Student evaluations of teachers, per se, have relatively little impact on an individual's subsequent repertoire of teaching behaviors. Although there certainly are individual differences among instructors in this regard, previous research on the use of student evaluations indicates that significant positive changes in teaching behavior generally require personal intervention and one-on-one consultation with a peer or an instructional expert who assists in interpreting the evaluation results and planning a course of action (Aleamoni, 1978, 1981; McKeachie, 1979).

Although there has been considerable research on the use of various types of evaluation data for faculty development (e.g., Millman, 1981; Fuller & Manning, 1973), most departments and colleges do not have trained instructional specialists available to conduct an effective program. Some colleges and universities do offer formal programs for professional development of teaching skills, but these services are often criticized for being underutilized by the

faculty members who need them most. The dilemma we have faced is the need to introduce established principles of faculty development and peer review of teaching in a format which will be both affordable within a limited budget and attractive to faculty members who really need it.

Objectives

The first objective of this paper is to describe a teaching consultation program which is based upon established principles of faculty development and instructor "self-confrontation" (Fuller & Manning, 1973). Additional objectives are to present a preliminary evaluation of the program based on participants' anonymous comments, and to discuss implications for the design and study of similar programs in other settings.

Program Description

The Consultants. The idea for a teaching consultation program came about late in the Fall Semester of 1983 as a collaborative project of the two authors. The first consultant (SRG) is a professor emerita of the College who retired from full-time service in December 1983 and now devotes approximately 20% of her time to the project. She has had extensive teaching experience, is highly regarded among the University faculty as an excellent teacher, and has received several awards from the College, the University, and from professional societies for her outstanding teaching, student advising, and service to the University.

The second consultant (JGC) is Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies. He is an educational psychologist with special interest in health professions education and instructional methods. He has served on a variety of faculty development programs for the past nine years and has conducted research on instructional methods and faculty development, primarily in medical education.

The College of Human Development was founded in 1967 and offers graduate and undergraduate degree programs in seven professions related to health and human services. The College has approximately 170 full-time faculty and an enrollment of approximately 3,600 full-time and 1,200 part-time students.

Consultation Process. The teaching consultation service was announced in December 1983 for interested faculty members in the College. Participation in this program is completely confidential, unless the individual instructor requests otherwise, in which case a report or letter may be shared with a Department Chairman, promotions committee, or others. The service is voluntary, individual, and personal. There are no classes or workshops which participants must attend. It is based solely on individual consultation, observation of teaching, and detailed critique.

The two consultants first meet with the instructor to discuss the individual's teaching responsibilities, strengths, weaknesses, and concerns. They make an appointment to visit the instructor in the classroom, if requested. Occasionally, the visit is made by videotape, in which case the consultants review the videotape privately before selecting excerpts to review with the instructor. After conferring with each other about the live or videotaped lesson, the consultants meet with the instructor to provide their critique and discuss specific recommendations. Repeat visits and critique are scheduled as requested to follow up on the use of new techniques or to address additional concerns that arise from the consultation.

A typical consultation session takes about an hour to an hour and a half. The introductory meeting usually requires about thirty to forty minutes.

During the consultation process, we frequently review selected course materials with the instructor. These may include course syllabi or handouts, lecture notes, charts and illustrations, and course examinations or quizzes. Faculty often wish to discuss and review the results of previous course evaluations by students as well. These are often particularly helpful in specifying the concerns or problems that the individual instructor would like to focus on. In this case, we are especially interested in helping the instructor to identify patterns which repeat over several courses or several semesters.

For example, one instructor was concerned about a trend from several course evaluations indicating that she did not generate much enthusiasm or rapport with students. Based on subsequent observation and critique sessions, we were able to discuss with her a variety of techniques for generating more student participation and greater enthusiasm for the course material. We did this by drawing out her own observations contrasting different episodes from the same class session in which student involvement and enthusiasm varied significantly depending on her own style and technique, such as types of questions used, tone of voice, and reactions to student comments.

During the consultation process, we will often recommend a related journal article, a chapter of a book, or a brief videotape excerpt demonstrating a particular style or skill of teaching. This is often given in response to a specific request from the instructor, but in other cases, we may simply offer it as a suggestion for further information. A few selections from our videotape file are particularly useful in this regard as a means of demonstrating various skills of lecturing or leading a discussion. In some cases, we will view a demonstration videotape with the instructor or demonstrate a technique ourselves as part of the consultation.

When major changes in teaching style are discussed, we also offer to return to another class for a follow-up visit. This is helpful in reinforcing whatever changes we discussed and in setting targets for further improvements or experimentation.

In developing this consultation process, we began by reviewing selected references on teacher self-confrontation (e.g., Fuller & Manning, 1973). We critiqued examples of large-group and small-group teaching via videotape and established a common framework for analyzing teaching and presenting feedback to instructors. Analyses are tailored to the individual instructor's concerns and generally focus on skills of lesson organization, pace, and delivery, and on methods of encouraging and guiding students' active participation.

Our primary interest is to be responsive to the interests and concerns of the individual instructor. We avoid giving any lectures on principles of teaching and focus instead on what the instructor already knows about teaching and how this knowledge and experience can be directed and enhanced to help solve the problems at hand. Our primary interest then is to develop the individual's ability to diagnose his or her teaching problems, to engage in some creative problem solving, and to become more open to new approaches.

Guidelines for the Critique. Table 1 provides a list of specific guidelines we have adopted for providing instructors with feedback on their observed teaching skills. The guidelines have been rephrased from an earlier chapter on faculty self-evaluation techniques (Carroll, 1981) and are based on the extensive literature review of Fuller & Manning (1973) on the use of videotape and audiotape playback as a training device for teacher education. Both the literature reviewed by Fuller & Manning and the experience we have encountered as teaching consultants in this program confirm the critical importance of explicit goal setting and focused feedback for changing instructors' teaching behavior.

> Change is said to require not only the presence of facilitative conditions such as acceptance and empathy, but also "confrontation," i.e., identification of a discrepancy between the person's view of reality and that of some observer. One possibility is that the teacher will not benefit from seeing her videotape alone since there is no confrontation, but will change only when focus is provided by a supervisor, a peer, or some instructions. The other possibility is that solitary playback is most beneficial on the assumption that it is a lower threat situation. The literature almost unanimously supports the view that confrontation, or at least some focus, is necessary. Feedback that is not accompanied by some focus has been found to change behavior little, if at all (Fuller & Manning, 1973, p. 493).

Goal setting is important to the process because it provides a shared understanding among the consultants and instructor of what specifically is to be observed during a particular classroom visit. By focusing on specific skills, techniques, or problems that have been determined in advance of the observation and critique sessions, the consultants can be certain that they are making observations and recommendations directly relevant to the individual instructor's interest. This also aids the consultants to look for discrepancies, and discrepancies are particularly powerful in changing an instructor's concepts, attitudes, or behaviors. There may be discrepancies between the instructor's perception and our own, between ideal and actual performance, or between planned and actual teaching activities.

In giving feedback to the instructor, we generally begin by asking for his or her own analysis. This is important in determining the insight already shared with the instructor and the amount and types of discrepancy to be resolved. We also strive to provide a balance of positive and negative criticisms in each critique session. The consultant must realize that too much negative criticism at one time may overwhelm and discourage the instructor whereas too little can create complacency and a lack of interest. Before the conclusion of each critique session, we also make a point of asking for a critique of the consultation process itself, and we encourage the instructor to raise any additional questions or comments.

Data Source

During the Spring 1984 semester, ten faculty members volunteered to participate. They represented four of the seven academic programs of the College, and they came from a wide range with respect to academic rank, teaching experience, and observed teaching styles. Because of other commitments, one consultant (JGC) was able to meet with only eight of the ten instructors jointly with the other consultant, and he observed only five of the ten in the classroom. The other consultant (SRG) met with all ten instructors and observed nine of them teaching. All ten participants completed a brief evaluation form anonymously at the end of the semester. They responded briefly to the following open-ended questions: (1) What were your reactions to the consultation, classroom visit, and feedback session? (2) Do you have any new insights in teaching effectiveness? (3) What would you recommend for improving this service in the future? (4) Additional comments?

Results and Discussion

The participants' responses indicated a consistently high level of regard for the program. All of the respondents were "very positive," "very favorable," or "extremely pleased" or indicated that they had found the program "extremely helpful." All participants reported that they gained new insights or strengthened existing ones. They also indicated that they genuinely appreciated this service, and they recommended that it be made available more widely and more often. The complete set of participant responses is available upon request from the first author. The following quotations are examples of faculty comments:

> "I have wanted to do this for years."
> "I found the whole process extremely helpful. . .The feedback session was particularly helpful in that it was precise and concrete. I could convert what I learned into action."
> "Most helpful, non-threatening."
> "I only wish that it had been done earlier in my career."

During 1984-85, ~~six~~ nine additional instructors are participating in the program thus far. We are also beginning to extend the program to interested Graduate Teaching Assistants in the College.

In addition, three special projects have been developed as spin-offs from the Spring 1984 consultation program. The first is an in-depth analysis and evaluation of a large required course as a semester-long project. During Spring 1985, we are observing lectures on a weekly basis for this course, which has an enrollment of approximately 450 students. We will be making recommendations to the instructor about overall course design, individual lectures, and the associated instructional materials and examinations.

A second project is in response to an invitation from a Department Head and several faculty to work with a group of clinical instructors in one of the health-related programs of the College. In addition to individual consultations with interested faculty in this program, we will be collaborating with the group to explore alternative, and possibly more efficient, methods for teaching students in the clinical setting.

A third project was begun during the Fall 1984 semester and will continue through Spring 1985. This is a collaborative program of five faculty and administrators to design, implement, and evaluate a series of workshops on racial awareness in the College. It is important to note that spin-off projects such as these are to be expected if the

consultation program is indeed successful in stimulating greater faculty awareness and interest in the quality of instruction. Program planners interested in offering a consultation program such as this should be mindful of this probability at the outset and should consider how they will be prepared to respond to requests for additional projects.

Conclusions. The initial phase of this experimental program suggests that the consultation format will be attractive and useful to a significant portion of the College faculty. The first ten participants endorsed the program unanimously and represented a broad range of backgrounds, content areas, and initial level of teaching skills. Among the nine faculty members we observed, some demonstrated outstanding ability as teachers. These instructors were interested in an objective assessment of their overall performance and wanted to improve a few relatively minor problems. There were other instructors who appeared to lack some of the essential classroom skills of good teachers, and these individuals have participated in follow-up observation, mutual planning, and continued consultation. About two-thirds of the participants were between these two extremes. These individuals had most of the basic skills they needed, but they were able to identify specific problems with certain kinds of students or certain teaching situations. These teachers generally seemed to need a better understanding of their particular problem or situation. They also needed a larger repertoire of choices to work with and more confidence to try something new.

The initial phase of the program has also shown that it is financially feasible. The total incremental cost of the program for one semester is approximately $2,600 for consulting fees. For Spring 1984, this represented an average cost of $260 per client, which compares favorably with the cost of an external workshop or travel to a regional or national meeting.

Summary. This consultation model has great potential as a cost-effective technique for instructional improvement at the college and departmental level. It appeals to a wide range of faculty and engages them in an active, thought-provoking, and collegial process of professional renewal. We are extending this model to interested graduate teaching assistants and to all incoming junior faculty members in the College. Three continuing projects for instructional development have evolved from the first group of consultation sessions held last year. In the near future, we also hope to conduct research on the impact of the consultation process on students' cognitive and affective outcomes.

TABLE 1

Guidelines for Providing a Teaching Critique*

1. The observation setting should be typical rather than unusual.

2. The critique setting should be psychologically safe (e.g., confidential).

3. There should be prior agreement on the goals and behaviors to be focused on.

4. Optimum results are most likely with instructors who:

   a. are genuinely interested in participating
   b. have personal concerns or goals related to teaching
   c. are young and intelligent
   d. have relatively good self-esteem
   e. are open to change and have the capacity for it
   f. are able to describe some deficiencies before the critique
   g. are able to identify discrepancies between observed and expected performance

5. The feedback provided should be:

   a. clearly focused on discrepancies that are moderate, rather than large or small
   b. unambiguous, trustworthy, informative
   c. accepted by the instructor as accurate
   d. balanced in terms of identifying strengths and weaknesses
   e. presented in a context in which treatments are available for establishing new behaviors

6. The persons serving as focusers should:

   a. have previously been videotaped themselves
   b. communicate authenticity, positive regard, and empathy
   c. negotiate the goals of consultation sessions
   d. confront the instructor with moderate discrepancies
   e. be nonjudgmental toward the instructor

*Adapted from Carroll (1981) and Fuller & Manning (1973)

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Carol Cartwright and William Toombs for their helpful suggestions and advice with earlier drafts of the paper.

An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of a workshop at the Second Annual Conference of Academic Chairpersons: Leadership and Management; Orlando, Florida; February 7, 1985.

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